

Physical Healing

- hard questions about medicine, miracles and sickness

CONCEPTS AND QUESTIONS

Contrasting images

When we raise the question of physical healing within the context of the Christian faith a variety of pictures come to mind; for example the:

- **Medical missionary:** often working in poor conditions with few drugs or facilities yet making available what healing they can to the sick and the needy; sharing the gospel through their work which is their major witness;
- **Parish priest:** at the bedside of an ailing member of their congregation, bringing the comfort of Scripture, prayer, the sacraments and possibly anointing with oil; opening the opportunity for a recovery that is more than medical;
- **Hospice nurse:** sustaining the final days of terminally ill patients; creating a warm environment, controlling their pain, enabling them to die naturally and with dignity, no expectation that there will be healing or a cure;
- **Faith-healing preacher:** at the rostrum inspiring crowds of people to believe that a step of faith is all that divides them from experiencing complete healing from whatever sickness they are currently struggling with.

Apart from these there are of course thousands of Christians who serve as doctors, nurses, paramedics, carers, physiotherapists and the many other areas of medicine and healing. They work in clinics, health centres and hospitals alongside other equally committed practitioners, who have another, or no particular, faith commitment.¹

These examples raise important questions:

- What do we make of these contrasting Christian approaches to physical healing?
- Are some more biblical than others?
- Do some have more faith than others?
- Are any of them mistaken or even false?
- Are there clear common strands that unite each of them?
- Are they all-important facets of a truly Christian understanding of healing?
- What distinctive contribution does a Christian bring to physical healing?

Wholeness and healing

For a Christian the subject of physical healing flows out of the overall biblical truth about 'salvation', with its vision of 'wholeness', 'integratedness' and *shalom*. When God acts to save, one of the consequences is always healing in the broadest sense:

¹ The whole subject of 'Medicine and Society' is discussed in 04.01.07 and should be read in conjunction with this session.



- **Social healing:** the community and injustice;
- **Physical healing:** the body and sickness;
- **Inner healing:** the mind and emotions;

True 'health' is not to be defined in the popular, limited and negative idea of simply 'being free from disease', but rather, in the words of the World Health Organisation, 'a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease and infirmity'. This accords exactly with the biblical perspective. While this session will keep its focus simply on the issues related to physical healing, we must remain aware of its broader connections.²

Alternative medicine

The challenge of physical healing to a contemporary Christian comes not only from what are believed to be the expectations and guidelines of Scripture, and the possibilities and limitations of modern medical science, but also from the vast number of alternative medical therapies that are increasingly on offer from so many different sources.

In recent centuries, medicine in western cultures has developed almost exclusively along the path of rational empirical science and has found astonishing success in the process. Diseases and conditions, for which once nothing could be done, are now either eliminated or routinely cured. Christians have been actively involved in helping with its development and the promotion of its benefits. However, there have been some people who have had growing concerns. There remain many conditions about which modern medical science can do very little or over which it is impotent. It often focuses solely on the illness to the exclusion of other factors. Its treatments can be highly invasive and at times somewhat speculative. Some feel that many of the conditions modern medicine is trying to treat are caused by the very nature of the secular scientific society of which it is itself a product.

Those who have become dissatisfied with current medical science, or who have sicknesses which have been offered no healing, have challenged the establishment and looked elsewhere. The numbers of alternative options are stunning:

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| * Acupuncture | * Osteopathy | * Reflexology | * Medicine wheel |
| * Hatha yoga | * Homeopathy | * Shiatsu | |

... to mention but a tiny fraction of the choices available.

Some are ancient while others are recent; some are western while many come from different cultures across the globe. A few are completely strange, some are obviously dangerous, but many of them have apparently brought great benefit to numbers of people. Whatever conclusions are finally drawn, alternative medicine has made two

² The broader issues of healing are dealt with both directly and indirectly in Workshop notes, 'Listening & Loving'; 'Caring & Confronting'; 'Good News to the Poor'; 'Church & State'.



important points, which have slowly had some impact upon the thinking of growing numbers of practitioners of conventional medicine. They are:

- Medicine must treat people as a whole, not just parts of them; true healing must be holistic;
- Reality must include the spiritual, which has to be seriously considered as an important vehicle for healing.

These points agree exactly with a biblical understanding of healing. Why is it then that so many Christians are hostile to any form of alternative therapy, seeing it as potentially demonic, while having few qualms about conventional medicine with its roots in the rational and empirical alone? What should a Christian response be? Would not a true Christian understanding of healing put it among the alternative therapies in the eyes of medical science? What is the difference? Is there any overlap? All these questions will have to be addressed as this session unfolds.

Searching questions

The subject of a Christian understanding of physical healing is not simple. There are many astonishing examples of miraculous unexplained healings that have come about as a result of prayer and faith in the name of Jesus. There are even more stories of people who have prayed and believed but no healing has taken place. Some Christians argue that no believer should ever be sick, while others would do nothing more than go to their doctor if they were ill. Quite different theologies abound and searching questions remain. Here are just a few of them:

- Why does sickness occur?
- Can physical healing include medical care and / or miraculous interventions?
- What is a Christian's responsibility for their body?
- Does healthy living [eating and exercise] play a part in physical healing?
- Doesn't Christian care for the sick witness God's love as much as miracles?
- Is Christian involvement in medicine a waste of time?
- Is visiting a doctor evidence of a lack of faith?
- After prayer for healing should the person throw away their medication?
- What about Paul's 'thorn in the flesh'?
- Why doesn't God heal everyone who is prayed for?
- What is the relationship between faith and healing?
- Why do we have to pray for healing if God wants every one to be whole?
- How much faith do we need to have for someone to be healed?
- Is it always right to pray for a person's physical healing?
- How should prayer for physical healing actually be carried out?
- What is the significance of anointing with oil when praying for the sick?
- How could Jesus' robe, Paul's 'kerchief and Peter's shadow bring healing?
- When is it right to pray and right to let the sickness take its natural course?
- Is there a difference in the power of a single prayer and persistent prayer?
- God doesn't heal everyone; how does he choose? Does he still love the sick?
- What questions should we be asking God when someone is ill?
- Why do there seem to be more miraculous healings in the two-thirds world?



- What is the connection between sickness and sin?
- Does God ever send sickness as punishment?
- Can sickness ever be due to a curse or the demonic?
- Do sickness and disability have a place in Christian experience?
- Can it not be good to accept sickness and learn lessons from it?
- What is the connection between healing, forgiveness and atonement?
- If healing is in the atonement should we not proclaim everyone can be healed?
- Do promises of wholeness only refer to the resurrection body?
- If death is the final healing, why do people suffer with disabilities for years?
- Are some conditions easier for God to heal than others?
- Has our rationalist culture made it hard for many Christians to believe?
- Didn't miraculous healing end with the apostles and the early church?
- Can a person be 'healed' and their symptoms still remain?
- How long must a miraculous healing last to be seen as truly authentic?
- Why are there so many healings in the Bible and so few in local churches?
- How central are healings to our salvation?
- Do dramatic physical healings help unbelievers come to faith in Jesus?
- How do Jesus' healings affect our attitude towards disability?
- How do we understand healing in the relation to the end-times?
- Is all alternative medicine satanic, psychosomatic or deception?
- How do healers in other faiths often get the same results as Christians?
- Doesn't alternative medicine aid Christian healing in raising popular interest?
- Are not big Christian healing meetings open to charges of hysteria?
- What do we make of someone who says they have a 'ministry of healing'?

EXAMPLES FROM SCRIPTURE AND HISTORY

Sickness and healing in the Bible

Communities throughout biblical times struggled with the issues of illness and disease as much as any other people throughout the whole of history. References to sickness and healing in the Bible need to be read with an understanding that:

- **The purpose** of the stories is theological rather than medical; for example, it is sufficient to state that a boy is, 'paralysed and in distress' [Matt 8:6], a severe illness but cured by the power of God in Jesus;
- **The descriptions** of disease were simply what could be seen or felt; for example, the term 'leprosy' refers to a range of skin conditions and even discolouration on clothing and the walls of a house [Lev 13:1-59; 14:33-57]³;
- **The treatment** of illness is described in general terms and is usually made up of folk remedies; for example, a 'cake of figs' on sores [Isa 38:21], oil and wine on wounds [Luke 10:34];
- **The physicians** get scant mention and most of it is rather negative [cf. 2 Chron 16:12; Job 13:4; Luke 8:43], though clearly they played a recognised role [cf.

³ Luke's Gospel is marked by the use of medical terminology, suggesting that the author is 'the beloved physician' [Col 4:14]; he alone quotes, 'Physician, heal yourself!' [Luke 4:23].



- Luke 5:31]; the main stress of Scripture is, 'I am the Lord who heals you' [Exod 15:26];
- **The demonic** is seen to be the source behind a range of physical and mental disorders [cf. 1 Sam 16:14-15; Matt 9:32]; it emphasises the integrated sense of personhood and the conviction that physical sickness had its source in evil;⁴
 - **The suffering** of diseases could come as a consequence of God's people not being obedient to him [cf. Deut 28:22, 27, 58-61] and fall on other nations as a punishment [cf. 1 Sam 5:6];
 - **The standard** of hygiene in Israel was high in contrast to other cultures; for example, God made the covenant promise that, 'none of these diseases' [Deut 7:12-16] would afflict the nation, seen in the strong health emphasis of many Torah instructions.⁵

As mentioned above, the basis for a biblical understanding of physical healing is that God is 'the Lord who heals' [Exod 15:26]. The principle is clear:

'Bless the Lord, O my soul,
and do not forget all his benefits –
who forgives all your iniquity,
who heals all your diseases.'
[Ps 103:2-3]

Whether the healing took place as a result of methodical medical care or a clear miracle, God is the one who heals. The majority of healings mentioned in the Bible could be described as 'miraculous' in one sense or another, the result of the sovereign in-breaking of the mercy and power of God into the sufferer's circumstances: and that is why they are recorded. However, it is obvious that in terms of biblical history the majority of healings were the result of natural physical processes with the support of whatever medical care was available.

With these observations as a background we shall examine examples of physical healing in both Scripture and Christian history for the purpose of understanding and developing principles to guide us in our attitudes and responses today.

Hebrew Scriptures

Whether medicinal or miraculous, healings in the Hebrew Scriptures are almost all attributed to the intervention of God. Interestingly, most of the recorded accounts, with the exception of Job, cluster around the events of the Exodus and ministry of the prophets:

□ The Exodus

- The recovery of Moses from distress following disobedience [Exod 4:24-26];
- The protection of Israel from the plague diseases of Egypt [cf. Exod 8:22; Deut 7:15];

⁴ This will be discussed at greater length below in the final section of this session

⁵ The significance of this is brought out in S I McMillen, *None of These Diseases*, Marshall Pickering, 1984.



- The healing of Miriam's leprosy [Num 12:1-15];
 - The recovery from snakebite by looking at the bronze serpent [Num 21:6-9].
- **The Prophets**
- The prophet healing Jeroboam's suddenly paralysed hand [1 Kgs 13:4-6];
 - The raising of the widow of Zaraphath's son to life by Elijah [1 Kgs 17:17-24];
 - The raising of the Shunammite woman's son to life by Elisha [2 Kgs 4:1-37];
 - The healing of Naaman in obedience to Elisha's command [2 Kgs 5:8-14];
 - The recovery of Hezekiah at the authority of Isaiah [2 Kgs 20:1-11].
- **The Wise**
- The healing of Job from loathsome sores [cf. 3:7; 42:10].

These stories establish the principle that God is the source of all healing and is well able and sometimes willing to sovereignly interrupt the expected destructive process of sickness and death – once in a while miraculously, on other occasions aiding medical procedures, but always dramatically. However, the numbers of records of such healings are not many across the ages charted by the Hebrew Scriptures. Nevertheless, they set an important backdrop to the events of the New Testament.

Ancient and primal

Healing that has a primary focus on the spiritual and religious is the oldest form of healing and early medical practice grew out of it and alongside it:

- Almost every culture has had its witchdoctors, shamans and healers who have mediated between the spiritual forces and terrors of surrounding nature and the health and wellbeing of the community;
- The Dionysiac mysteries and the temples of Aesculapius and Epidaurus were places of healing, and the healing gods such as Apollo, Aesculapius and Zeus were given the title *Soter* [saviour];
- Various rabbis in the 1st century CE, including Hanina ben Dosa and Honi the Rainmaker, were said to have healing powers;
- From time immemorial kings, rulers, emperors, leaders, philosophers and others have all been said, on occasions, to have healing power in their touch or actions.

There were three main ways in which the ancient world viewed healing:

- Medicine: working with the natural remedies;
- Miracle: belief in divine intervention;
- Magic: manipulating mysterious forces.

Jesus' miraculous healings were clearly seen to take place as a consequence of moving in the second area of divine intervention.



Ministry of Jesus

Healing the sick was one of the primary hallmarks of Jesus' public ministry and one of the main pieces of evidence given as to why people should accept his teaching and believe in him. Some of the healings were in response to faith while others were to instill faith. They demonstrated his compassion and his desire to break down social barriers. Most of all they supported his teaching that the kingdom of God was arriving with his public ministry and that he was God's unique Son.

In the combined narrative of the four Gospels there are over 20 stories of the healing of individuals or small groups [e.g. Luke 4:40-41]. Demon possession is clearly distinguished from other forms of disease [e.g. Mark 1:32-34]. Some people came in large numbers [Matt 4:23-24] and all were healed [Luke 4:40]:

- Some were healed at a distance [cf. Matt 8:5-13];
- Some were healed with a word but no physical contact [cf. Matt 8:16];
- Some were healed with physical contact [cf. Mark 1:41];
- Some were healed using 'means' (e.g. spittle and clay) [Mark 8:22-26];
- One needed a double miracle to fully restore his sight [Mark 8:22-26];
- Only once did Jesus publicly invoke God's name in healing [John 11:41-42].

Three different types of healing miracles were mentioned by the Gospel writers:

□ **Exorcisms:** Jesus frequently casts out more than one demon from an individual; these demons often recognise Jesus when most of the onlookers do not. Jesus demonstrates his mastery over Satan. Comparing ancient exorcism stories with the accounts about Jesus, we see his were more immediate, with less struggle and violence from either the demons or the means of exorcism. The Gospel writers distinguish fairly clearly between physical and mental sickness and demon possession [cf. Matt 10:1; Mark 3:10-11].

□ **Physical healings:** Jesus regularly helped people suffering from a wide range of illnesses or physical disabilities:

- Blind to see [e.g. Matt 9:27-31; Mark 8:22-26];
- Deaf to hear [e.g. Matt 11:5; Mark 7:32-37];
- Lame to walk [e.g. Luke 5:12-16]
- Leprosy [e.g. Luke 17:11-19];
- Fevers to be cured [e.g. Mark 1:29-31; John 4:43-53];
- Hemorrhage stopped [Mark 5:24-34];
- Withered hand restored [Mark 3:1-6];
- Amputated ear replaced [Luke 22:51];
- Plus many unspecified illnesses.

□ **Resurrections:** there are three occasions when Jesus brought individuals who had recently died, back to life:

- The daughter of Jairus [Mark 5:35-43];
- The widow of Nain's son [Luke 7:11-17];

- Lazarus [John 11:1-44].

These were really resuscitations because each of them later died. Only Jesus actually rose from the dead and remains alive. The credibility of each of these resurrections, as actual events, depends very much on the credibility of Jesus' own resurrection and therefore anticipates our own.

The Gospel writers are not just retelling the healing stories of Jesus out of historical interest, but also to communicate the fact that every healing is presenting theological truth and meaning to the Christian communities to whom they were writing. Some of the major themes are:⁶

□ **Teaching about faith:**

- Sometimes Jesus heals *because* of faith: Jairus' daughter and woman with hemorrhage [Mark 5:34-36];
- Sometimes *lack* of faith prevents healings: as in Nazareth [Matt 13:58] and the disciples and demoniac epileptic [Matt 17:20];
- Sometimes there are healings when there is little or no faith in order to *instil* faith; all healings in John's Gospel have this purpose [cf. 20:31];
- Sometimes towns are upbraided for *not responding* in faith because miracles were done in them [cf. Matt 11:20-24];
- Sometimes Jesus refused healings (signs) to give them *reason* to have faith [cf. John 4:48; 20:29].

This evidence challenges the idea that all that is needed for healing is simply enough faith. Some would argue that it teaches that where there is enough faith healings are not so necessary. The truth must be subtler than this.

□ **Jesus' compassion:**

Jesus' healings were clearly motivated by compassion [e.g. Matt 14:14; 20:34; John 11:35-37]. However, compassion alone is obviously not the only motivation for healing or else Jesus would have healed all sick people, which he didn't do [cf. John 5:3-5 – the healing at the pool of Bethesda]. Sometimes God is glorified through suffering as well as through healing.

□ **Removing social barriers:**

- Touches a leper, challenging ritual taboos [cf. Mark 1:41];
- A Samaritan is healed of leprosy [Luke 17:11-19];
- The daughter of a Gentile (Syro-Phoenician) [Mark 7:24-30].

⁶ These themes are identified by C Blomberg in 'Healing' in J B Green (ed.), *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, IVP, 1998, pp. 299-307.



□ **Challenging Israel's faithlessness:**

- Healing on the Sabbath [e.g. Mark 3:1-6; Luke 13:10-17; 14:1-6], the restrictions were nothing more than legalism;
- The Roman centurion had more faith than Israel [Luke 7:9] Gentiles would replace many Jews in the kingdom of God [Matt 8:5-13];
- The wickedness of the Jews influenced the disciples' ability to heal [Matt 17:17].

□ **Teaching about sin:**

- To the man healed at Bethesda Jesus says, 'Do not sin any more that nothing worse befall you' [John 5:14] – sickness a consequence for sin?
- The man born blind was not as a result of either his sin or his parents'; it was to manifest God's glory [John 9:3].

Sometimes healing undoes the consequences of sin; at other times there is no connection between health and obedience or sickness and sin.

□ **Signs of the kingdom / Messiah:**

All miracles in the Gospels [healing or otherwise] demonstrate the inauguration of the kingdom of God in the person of Jesus the Messiah. Some passages make this explicit:

- Exorcism by the Spirit of God proves the kingdom has come upon them [Matt 12:28];
- Healings are given as evidence to John's disciples that Jesus was 'the one that was to come' [Matt 11:4-6];
- The healing of the paralytic lowered through the roof proves the Son of man has authority to forgive sins; a prerogative of God alone [Mark 2:10-11];
- Giving sight to the blind reveals Jesus as 'the light of the world' [John 9:5];
- Raising Lazarus reinforces Jesus claim to be 'the resurrection and the life' [John 11:25];
- There are a number of summary statements in the Gospels that link his teaching and healing as the twin emphases of his ministry [cf. Matt 4:23; 9:35; 21:14] in its call to repent 'for the kingdom of God is near' [Mark 1:15];
- Some healings echo the Hebrew Scriptures in pointing indirectly towards the arrival of the messianic age:
 - The deaf-mute [Mark 7:32] could 'hardly talk'; a phrase only used in the LXX in Isa 35:6 in describing the age to come when the 'mute tongue' will 'shout for joy'.
 - The raising of the widow of Nain's son [Luke 7:11-17] connects with Elisha raising the Shunammite's son [2 Kgs 4:8-37]; Nain and Shunem were probably on the same site. The crowd make the connection, calling Jesus 'the great prophet' [v16; cf. Deut 18:18]

Each of the four Gospel writers brings their own particular emphases to the individual documents and so communicate different dimensions to the subject of physical healing:

□ **Matthew:**

- The largest group of healing miracles are in Matthew 8–9 where Jesus is presented as one mighty in deed, with sovereignty and authority; focus on Christology [8:28-34; 9:1-8];
- Those healed confess Jesus Son of David (Messiah) [9:27-31; 20:29-34]; others acknowledge him as Lord [8:2; 15:22; 17:15];
- The healings fulfill Hebrew prophecy [11:4-5; cf. Isa 61:1; 35:6] especially 'Suffering Servant' [8:17 cf. Isa 53:4];
- On two occasions Jesus heals two blind people when Mark and Luke mention just one [9:27-31; 20:29-34]; confirmed by two witnesses [Deut 19:15];
- The Gospel is both particular and universalistic; Jesus is seen as the healer of Israel, where their leaders have failed [10:5-6; 15:24], but heals the daughter of a Canaanite woman [15:28] – house of Israel and then the world;
- Healing fuels the controversy with the religious leaders that leads to Jesus' death [21:14-17];
- Following the resurrection, Jesus' commission to evangelise does not include the command to heal the sick, as he had done earlier [28:18-20; cf. 10:7-8].

□ **Mark:**

- 31% of the gospel devoted to healings [largest proportion of the four];
- They demonstrate the establishing of the kingdom and the need for repentance [6:7-12];
- Emphasises the power of Jesus in his confrontation with Satan (disease, demons and death) [5:1-43];
- There is an immediacy in the miracles of healing [1:29, 42; 2:8];
- There is a greater sense of combat and violence in healing [1:25; 5:6-13];
- We see Jesus' emotions and even anger at the devil's work;
- There is a stress on 'messianic silence', not telling people who Jesus is and what happened [e.g. 1:34; 3:12; 5:43; 7:36] to avoid misunderstanding;
- Twice Jesus contrasts the unbelief of the crowds and disciples with the faith of those healed [8:14-26; 9:1-32];
- Yet the disciples are empowered to heal as Jesus did [6:7-12];
- Healing became a focus for controversy with religious leaders [2:1-12; 3:1-6];
- Healings are a kind of teaching themselves [1:27];
- The only Gospel to associate anointing oil with healing [6:13];
- Mark expects healing to continue into the church of his day; hence his emphasis in 1:1-8:26, but it is a church facing persecution so also needs to follow the way of the cross [8:27–16:7].

□ **Luke:**

- This is the only Gospel to tell the healing stories of:



- The 'Good Samaritan' [10:25-37];
 - Raising the widow of Nain's son [7:11-16];
 - Woman crippled for 18 years [13:11-16];
 - The man with dropsy [14:1-4];
 - The 10 lepers [17:12-19];
 - Restoring Malchus' (High Priest's servant) severed ear [22:51 cf. John 18:10].
- Concern for Jesus' true humanity and compassion for the outcasts of society, like healing the Samaritan leper [7:1-10; 17:11-19];
 - Jesus is saviour of the world [2:11] which includes physical healing [4:18];
 - Lines are blurred between disease and the demonic (healing and exorcism); Jesus 'rebukes' sickness [4:35-39], there is 'spirit of infirmity' (unique in NT) [13:11-12]; demons recognise Jesus as Son of God [4:41; 8:28];
 - There is healing in touching the hem of his robe [8:44], but it is faith not magic that heals [v48];
 - Strong emphasis on Gentiles being seen as worthy [7:1-10];
 - Jesus is also the fulfilment of Jewish hopes [4:16-21; 24:44];
 - Healings create faith [16:31] but conversion and salvation are primary [10:20].

More details are given and Luke uses the more technical word [Gk *iaoma*] for healing, which one would expect of a physician, rather than the non-technical terms used by the other Gospel writers.

□ **John:**

- Fewest of all healings mentioned in any Gospel; only four healings but each is given a strong theological interpretation:
 - The son of the nobleman from Capernaum [4:46-53];
 - Raising of Lazarus from the dead [11:38-44];
 - The man by the pool of Bethesda paralysed 38 years [5:1-16];
 - The man born blind [9:1-14].
- Never refers to healing people in large numbers nor to healing the demon-possessed;
- Greatest contrast in presenting Jesus' healings;
- Healings designed to bring people to faith in Jesus as Son of God and Messiah [4:54];
- Healings can bring people to confess faith [20:31], but praises those who do not need this evidence to believe [4:48; 20:29];
- Healings are not only 'signs' but 'works' [5:36], not independent events but central to the total activity of God [4:34; 5:17];
- Signs stimulate discourses of Christological significance; light of the world [9:5] resurrection and life [11:25], demonstrating God's glory [9:3; 11:40];
- Healings provoke controversy with the Jews including death threats [5:16-47; 9:13-41; 11:45-57; 12:10-11]; yet some leaders are favourable [9:16; 11:45].



The healings in John's Gospel are not only 'mighty works' but also 'signs'; while they touch the individual and the physical they point beyond themselves to a spiritual and eternal truth and reality; signs of God's glory and testimony of the Father to Jesus whom he empowers.

New Testament church

Jesus commissioned the disciples; the 12 [Matt 10:1] and the 70 [Luke 10:9] to heal. There has been much debate over the words that are in the so-called 'longer ending' of Mark's Gospel [16:9-20], especially the words:

'And these signs will accompany those who believe:
by using my name they will cast out demons;
they will speak in new tongues;
they will pick up snakes in their hands,
and if they drink any deadly thing it will not hurt them;
they will lay their hands on the sick,
and they will recover.'
[vv17-18]

These words have been very influential among many groups of Christians over the years, but are open to the accusation that we have no certainty as to whether they were ever part of the original Gospel or actually spoken by Jesus. The question is whether they say anything that is not the experience of Christians in the rest of the New Testament and the early church.

In the book of Acts there are several accounts of individual healing miracles of particularly similar character to those performed by Jesus:

- Peter and John heal the lame man at the Jerusalem temple gate [3:1-16];
- Peter heals the paralytic at Lydda [9:33-34];
- Paul heals the lame man at Lystra [14:8-10];
- Paul heals the father of Publius from dysentery [28:8].

There are also a few reports of multiple healings [e.g. 5:15-16], clothing taken from Paul for the purposes of healing sick people elsewhere [19:11-12]. Two people rose from the dead:

- Peter raises Dorcus [9:36-41];
- Paul raises Eutychus [20:9-10].

There are also clear accounts of Christians being ill, so important members of the early Christian community were certainly not free from all sickness:

- Timothy's gastric complaint [1 Tim 5:23];
- Trophimus too ill to accompany Paul from Miletus [2 Tim 4:20];
- Epaphroditus was gravely ill [Phil 2:30]; healing due to God's mercy [v27].

□ Paul's view of sickness

Paul clearly considers sickness, along with other afflictions that all people suffer, as part of the fallen natural order. Suffering is without doubt part of being a servant of Christ [2 Cor 11:23–12:10]; it can both motivate someone in preaching the gospel [Gal 4:13-14], while at the same time be identified as a messenger from Satan [2 Cor 12:7].

Many people believe that Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 11:27-32 imply that both sickness and death are possible judgments for a Christian's abuse of the Lord's supper. However, this passage is also open to meaning that it is the poor who become sick and die because the rich do not share their food with them at the covenant meal. As a consequence the poor are sick and die due to lack of nourishment. What greater dishonour of the Lord's body can there be? This logical interpretation would not see the sickness and death as a direct judgment from God but rather as the consequence of injustice and as a judgment on the local church.

Some say that the implications of Romans 1:18-32 and 1 Corinthians 10:1-14 suggest that Paul held the view that sickness can sometimes be caused by sin; this is certainly open to serious debate. Paul, however, does not seem to see his own sickness in this way [cf. 2 Cor 12:7-10].

The fact that Paul calls Luke 'the beloved physician' [Col 4:14] would seem to suggest that he probably had a favourable attitude towards at least some members of the medical profession.

□ Gifts of healing

The only place where Paul refers directly to the subject of physical healing is when he speaks about 'gifts of healing', in his discussion about the gifts of the Spirit [1 Cor 12:9, 28, 30]. These gifts are an expression of the Holy Spirit's presence. When he is speaking of healing, Paul says that the 'individual' (singular) person receives 'gifts (plural) of healing'. This suggests that a Christian does not inherently possess power to heal but that the necessary 'gifts of healing' are given to them for specific and different needs. Also, the gift of healing is clearly mentioned in the context of local Christian communities; it does not seem to envisage itinerant healers.

There seem to be very few direct references to Paul being a healer in his letters. Do references to 'miracles' [Gal 3:5] and 'signs and wonders' [Rom 15:18-19; 2 Cor 12:12] include physical healing? Probably they do; especially with reference to winning the faith of the Gentiles to Jesus.

As we have mentioned above, however, the book of Acts mentions a number of incidents that connect Paul with healing; in total they are:

- The lame man in Lystra had faith to be healed after Paul spoke [14:8-18];
- The clairvoyant girl in Philippi is exorcised [16:16-18];
- Extraordinary miracles via handkerchiefs and aprons touching Paul [19:11-12];
- Eutychus is raised from the dead by being embraced by Paul [20:7-12];

- Paul himself healed of a deadly snakebite [28:1-6];
- In Malta Paul laid hands on Publius, father of the island chief, for healing along with many others who came to be cured [28:9].

□ **Paul's 'thorn in the flesh'**

The subject of Paul's 'thorn in the flesh', mentioned in 2 Corinthians 12:7-10, has generated extensive debate over centuries. Some of the suggested understandings are:

- The persecution Paul experienced (Chrysostom); 'messenger' and 'batter' [v7] are both personal terms;
- Every kind of temptation; sexual in particular because of the word 'flesh' (Calvin);
- Some form of physical illness (most interpreters since Tertullian):
 - Epilepsy (link with his conversion experience);
 - Hysteria;
 - Migraine;
 - Depression;
 - Severe sciatica;
 - Rheumatism;
 - Poor hearing;
 - Leprosy;
 - Stammering;
 - Damage to retina (due to blinding light at Damascus, cf. Gal 6:11);
 - Malarial fever.

Its spiritual significance is more important than its actual medical or psychological diagnosis. Paul says it was a 'messenger from Satan', but also implies it was 'given to me' by God. He gives three reasons:

- To keep his feet on the ground, stopping him from becoming conceited [2 Cor 12:7];
- To enable him to be spiritually powerful [v9];
- To enable personal service to Christ [v10].

There is an interesting connection between Paul's 'thorn in the flesh' and the story of Jacob's limp (shrunken sinew) having wrestled with the angel of God on the banks of the River Jabbock [Gen 32:24-32]. It certainly implies that not only is illness something that God does not always heal but also there are occasions when it can serve his creative purposes.

□ **James' prayer for the sick**

There is the classic passage about prayer for the sick in the letter of James [5:13-20], which has been a matter of considerable debate among Christians and has influenced different practices on the issue of physical healing within the church:

‘Are any among you sick?
They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them,
anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord.
The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up;
and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven.
Therefore confess your sins to one another,
and pray for one another, so that you may be healed.
The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.’
[vv14-16]

One of the most striking facts about this passage is its reference to healing within the church; with a very few exceptions the New Testament statements and examples of healing point outwards to those not yet part of the community of faith. There are a number of observations that it is important to make:

- The calling of the elders [local church leadership] indicates that the sickness and distress of the individual becomes the concern of the whole church;
- The prayer of faith is clearly the primary and most important action. The whole passage is about the power of prayer; however, it may be stressing one of two possible senses:
 - Prayer as intercession, asking God to heal;
 - Prayer of authority which itself brings about the actual healing.
- The anointing with oil accompanies the prayer of faith; the actual purpose of the oil is far from clear:
 - The oil may well have been medicinal; soothing, cleansing, warming the body of the patient;
 - The oil may have been used to reinforce faith; a symbolic action with which the sufferer could directly connect;
 - Some have suggested that the oil may have been a spiritual ritual which separated the sickness from the patient on to Christ, just as the messianic anointing of Hebrew kings separated them from the common people;
 - Whatever the detail, this is clearly a holistic approach to treatment. There would have been no understanding of a separate ‘medical’ and ‘spiritual’ approach.
- The focus of the passage is ‘the name of Lord’. The whole matter is referred to God; he is the one who will heal;
- The confession of sin appears to be integrally bound up in the path towards healing; we need to be careful in making too close a link between sickness and sin, but a right relationship with God for those within the church appears to be an important precursor to healing;
- This passage has provided the scriptural basis for the Catholic sacrament of ‘extreme unction’, an anointing offered to the dying with a view to their absolution and restoration; the health of soul and body;



- In the Eastern Orthodox church the seventh sacrament of Holy Unction is the anointing with oil of the sick for their complete recovery.

This passage needs to be handled carefully. It would seem to provide principles to consider when praying for the healing of a Christian, rather than the details for a 'healing ritual'. Its main emphasis is on God being the one who heals when approached in a prayer of faith. However, it does not exclude any form of medical help that may be available.

History of the church

The church's concern with physical healing continues from the close of the New Testament right up to the present day.

□ **The first five centuries**

Following the New Testament period, the ministry of healing continued as an unbroken experience. In many places Christian communities rivaled pagan temples as places of healing:

- **Tertullian** [c.160–220] says:

'Christ reforms our birth by a new birth from heaven; he restores our flesh from all that afflicts it; he cleanses it when leprous, gives it new light when blind, new strength when paralysed, when possessed by demons he exorcises it, when dead he raises it to life.'

- **Cyprian** [c.200–58] says:

'From the indwelling Spirit is given power that is able to quench the virus of poisons for the healing of the sick, to purge out the stains of foolish souls by restored health.'

- **Irenaeus** [c.120–95] says:

'The Gnostics, though they can produce miraculous effects, cannot perform works of healing like Christians, who heal the sick by laying hands on them.'

- **Hermas** [c.150] says:

'Those who know human suffering, yet do not relieve those sufferings, commit great sin.'

- **Gregory** [213–70] the 'Wonder worker' (Thaumaturgus) worked for many years in Pontus, northern Turkey. Many acts of spiritual healing were attributed to him, hence his nickname. This did much to win the pagan population from their gods to Christ.

Records of powerful spiritual healings continue to be reported well into the 5th century, but increasingly it begins to give way to superstition and the use of relics. Throughout the period of the first five centuries Christians also care for the sick in many different ways; they also often stay in cities to attend the dying when the pagan population has evacuated because of plague.

□ The Middle Ages

The tradition of Christian involvement in physical healing continues into and throughout the Middle Ages:

- The Celtic saints such as Patrick, Cuthbert, Bridget and others were all credited with miraculous healings.
- Monasticism always provided 'hospitality' and care for the sick in their communities, with personalities such as Francis of Assisi being attributed with powerful spiritual healings on occasions.
- Both the Waldenses (in 13th-century southern Europe) and the Bohemian Brethren (in 15th-century Prague) saw a resurgence of spiritual healing in their movements.

Since the Reformation

- **During the 16th century** dramatic cures were attributed to ministry of some reformers such as Martin Luther, and also among the different groups of the Anabaptists. Charles Borromeo, Catholic Archbishop of Milan, worked selflessly among the sick in the plague of 1576.
- **During the 17th century** spiritual healings were attributed to English Baptists such as Hanserd Knollys, William Kiffin and Vavasor Powell. Also to the Quakers and other puritan sects. Between 1662 and 1666 Valentine Greatrakes healed many in Ireland and England by laying on of hands and prayer.
- **During the 18th century** we hear John Wesley mentioning a number of dramatic spiritual healings in his *Journal*, and they were also known to have occurred among the German Pietists.
- **During 19th century**, apart from continuing Christian involvement in the development and practice of medicine, divine healing was a focus in a number of quarters. The German Prince Hohenlohe-Waldenburg-Schillingsfurst, canon of Grosswarden, and Father John of Kronstadt of Russia [1829–1909] were both involved in spiritual healing. The 'Peculiar People', a small sect of evangelical faith healers founded in London in 1838, relied on oil, prayer and nursing in their work. The Irvingites and the Mormons both made claims to experiences of remarkable healings. Of course the Christian Science movement became famous with its claim that both pain and disease were merely an illusion.

- **During the 20th century** Christian involvement with physical healing increased, not only with the advances in medical science and the growth of the hospice movement, but also with the renaissance of the ministry of spiritual healing, especially in the Pentecostal and charismatic movements. Early in the century individuals such as George Jeffreys (in the UK) and Aimee Semple McPherson (in the USA) held large healing meetings, a tradition continued with international evangelists such as Rhienhard Bonke. Less extrovert ministries of healing were developed with the 'Guild of Health' and 'Guild of St Raphael' in Anglicanism and the Iona Community of the Church of Scotland. The Catholic Francis McNutt's teaching on the subject had a major influence across many denominations.

INSIGHT AND ACTION

Picture of health

In looking at the biblical text as we have done it is clear that Scripture presents us with many different encounters with, and perspectives on, the subject of physical healing. This must stand as a clear warning against those who take simplistic and dogmatic opinions on the subject. It should also be of some encouragement to those who feel let down and disappointed with Christian teaching and practice in this area. While their experiences may have hurt and even disillusioned them, it humbly reminds all of us that there is still so much to discover about this subject.

Physical healing raises issues that involve many interwoven topics; for example:⁷

- Medical science;
- Miracles;
- Science and faith;
- Moving in faith;
- Prayer;
- Kingdom of God;
- Atonement;
- Problem of evil;
- Nature and means of revelation;
- Uniqueness of Jesus;
- Other world faiths.

Each of these is a challenging topic in its own right, but as we draw on them they will help us to become wiser in how we approach healing.

One thing that is certain, from the biblical material we have surveyed and the historical material we have examined, is that a Christian involvement in physical healing most certainly includes providing practical medical care for those who are ill, quite apart from any hope for, or belief in, the possibility of miraculous interventions

⁷ Each of these subjects is dealt with on the course in separate sessions; Medicine & Society 04.01.07; Parable & Miracle 03.01.09; Science & Faith 04.02.03; Moving in Faith 03.02.05; Prayer 03.02.03; The Kingdom 01.03.04; The Atonement 02.02.05; Problem of Evil 04.02.02; The Voice 01.03.0; Uniqueness of Jesus 04.02.07; World Views & World Faiths 04.02.05.



by God. Christian care for the sick, in the sacrifice of time and energy, has been their major contribution down through the centuries. It has been, and remains, a witness to God's love every bit as much as any miracle.

However, both the possibility and the expectation of divine action and miraculous healing remain an essential part of a Christian understanding of dealing with illness. The notion, popular in some Christian communities, that miracles ceased with the apostles and the close of the New Testament period does not stand up to the investigation of either history or theology. It is a theory that is based on a wholly artificial and arbitrary structuring of eras of history in an attempt to excuse Christian powerlessness rather than witness to the truth.⁸

The challenge of sickness and physical healing is a primary demonstration of the challenge of power. There is the power of love, compassion self sacrifice in the care of those suffering the ravages of illness. There is the power of the Spirit in bringing wholeness, often in miraculous ways. There is the power of challenging the effects of sin and evil within the world.

Sickness and sin

A vital initial question we need to ask is, 'Why does sickness occur?' While the answer is inevitably complex what is clear is that suffering and disease, when encountered or discussed in the Bible, is always bound up with questions about the nature and origin of evil and the way it manifests itself in the world. To emphasise this point by contrast, the biblical vision of the new heaven and earth is presented as a place with no sickness and suffering [cf. Rom 8:18; Rev 7:15-17; 21:4] and within which there is the presence of the Tree of Life which has leaves that are explicitly for the healing of the nations [Ezek 47:21; Rev 22:2].

The subject of the relationship between sickness and sin is hugely complex. Disease was not God's original plan for creation but a consequence of how the world is as a result of both cosmic and human rebellion bringing evil into the world and fracturing its original equilibrium. However, we must make a very clear distinction between recognising that Scripture sees all illness as a consequence of world being contaminated by sin and particular sicknesses being the result of specific sins.

However, the words of James [5:15-16] do seem to make a possible link with sin to sickness:

'The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up;
and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven.
Therefore confess your sins to one another,
and pray for one another, so that you may be healed.'

Added to this there are a number of occasions within the biblical story when sickness appears to be presented as a direct consequence of sin, for example:

⁸ This idea is known as 'Dispensationalism' and is discussed in more detail in The Hope: The Crisis 01.03.06.



- Moses disobedience [Exod 4:24-26]*
- Miriam's criticism of Moses (leprosy) [Num 12:1-15]*
- Israelite grumbling in the wilderness (serpents) [Num 21:6-9]*
- Possible Israelite rejection of God [Deut 28:22, 27, 58-61]
- Jeroboam's challenge to the prophet (paralysed hand) [1 Kgs 13:4-6]*
- Uzziah's pride and anger (leprosy) [2 Chron 26:16-23]
- Gehazi's obtaining gifts by a lie from Naaman [2 Kgs 5:25-27]
- Herod's arrogance (eaten by worms) [Acts 12:20-23]
- Elymas opposition to Paul (blindness) [Acts 13:4-12]

In the case of Moses, Miriam, the Israelites in the wilderness and Jeroboam the sickness was followed by the mercy of healing.⁹ For Uzziah and Herod, the disease was terminal; we do not know if this was the case with Elymas, he may have recovered subsequently.

Can sickness ever be due to a curse or the demonic? Gehazi is the only story in which there is any sense of a 'curse' [though the word is not used], falling on him and his family into the future. For Israel as a nation it was a warning as to the consequence of possible disobedience. So in answer to the question, 'Does God ever send sickness as punishment?' we have noted that there are certainly a few occasions when sinful acts have led individuals to suffer illness and disease. In a number of them God has forgiven and healed them. Rather than saying that God 'punished' people directly it would appear their open defiance and disobedience opened them up to the destructive forces of evil, reaping the consequences of their choices.

As we have seen earlier on several occasions, Jesus links healing with the forgiveness of sin:

- To the paralysed man healed at Capernaum Jesus says, 'Son, your sins are forgiven' [John 2:5];
- To the man healed at Bethesda Jesus says, 'Do not sin any more that nothing worse befall you' [John 5:14].

Here is a connection, in some cases, between sin and sickness, forgiveness and healing. This suggests that where this is the case people's choices are responsible. He also challenges the idea that it is usually the case, but rather it is part of the struggle with sin in the world:

'His disciples asked him,
 "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?"
 Jesus answered,
 "Neither this man nor his parents sinned;
 he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him."
 [John 9:2-3]

⁹ Indicated by an asterisk * against the stories in the list above



Good living

Public health and a sensible lifestyle are important biblical principles. Compared with other surrounding nations of the time, Israel had a remarkable 'public health' and sanitary code. The details are scattered throughout the Pentateuch, from Exodus to Deuteronomy. It deals with public hygiene, water supply, sewage disposal, inspection and selection of food and the control of infectious disease. There were the kosher principles of diet; not eating a range of certain animals [e.g. pork], forbidden to eat the carcasses of animals that had not been properly slaughtered. They were to bury or burn excreta [Exod 29:14]. The idea of 'quarantine' is based on the 40-day segregation of patients suffering from certain diseases demanded in Leviticus 12:1-4, and adopted by 14th-century Italians when they noticed the relative immunity Jews had from some plagues. Jewish ideas have influenced modern health thinking more than is often realised. The story of the Good Samaritan [Luke 10:30-37] has always inspired those involved in medical services in both self-sacrifice and aftercare.

In the light of this, and years of practical observation and experience in modern societies around the world, it is obvious that physical healing begins with good living [cf. 1 Cor 6:19-20]. Healthy living with diet and exercise and good public health services are all part of physical healing. As Jesus himself said:

'Those who are well have no need of a physician,
but those who are sick.'
[Matt 8:12]

Miracles and medication

The subject of physical healing from a Christian perspective inevitably focuses on 'miracles'. The care and compassion of nursing care is often overshadowed by a belief that the miraculous is the major contribution a Christian can make in this area. While this is a seriously mistaken emphasis, we must also recognise that the expectation of miracles is very important for a Christian involvement in healing:

- It challenges the secular worldview that underlies both popular thinking and medical science;
- It was at the centre of Jesus' public ministry and used to illustrate his teaching and authenticate his authority;
- It demonstrates God's power and love, helps to stimulate faith and as it is appropriate saves people from circumstances in which there is no other hope.

We must clearly recognise that a Christian understanding of miracles does not involve transcending or violating the natural principles that order the world, as many assume. Instead, miracles take place within 'reality', which is the wholeness of the totality of the physical, material and spiritual that exists only because of God and within which he can move freely to accomplish his will. Miracles are God acting naturally, though maybe surprisingly, within an environment that is rooted in his being. This is not irrational, as many try to claim, but of course it does challenge all worldviews that are dependent solely on truth and knowledge being based on observable phenomena alone.

This being so, the healings of Jesus stand up to careful scrutiny:

- Each event is presented as having a specific purpose; not everyone is healed and he will not heal to order; everything is done in keeping with proclaiming the kingdom of God;
- Non-Christian Jewish sources, such as Josephus and the Talmud, both acknowledge that Jesus was a healer;
- The manner of Jesus' healings are simple and authoritative, not embellished with spells and ritual like other healing accounts from the ancient [and even more modern] world;
- The stories of Jesus' healings fit the Palestinian historical context; the use of spittle and clay, the types of illness described; many of the places they took place have been actually identified by archaeology.

The fact that we have reason to believe that the accounts of Jesus' healing miracles are dependable it gives us reason to believe and expect miraculous healing today. Contrary to what many have tried to argue, the biblical evidence would suggest that miraculous healings will happen in every age of the history of the church but that they will probably be the exception rather than the norm.

□ **Arguments for miracles continuing:**

- Jesus sent his disciples on healing missions identical to his own [Matt 10:1-10], while some injunctions were later rescinded [Luke 22:35-38] healing was not;
- Acts shows similar healings done by Christians after the crucifixion, resurrection and ascension as done by Jesus and the disciples before; healing the lame [3:1-10; 14:8-10], casting out demons [5:6;16:6-18], raising the dead [9:36-41; 20:7-12]. Power attached to Jesus' robe reappeared with Peter's shadow [5:15] and Paul's handkerchief [19:11-12];
- Peter's healing of both Aeneas and Dorcus [Acts 9:32-42] closely parallels the similar stories in Luke's Gospel [5:7-26; 8:49-56], making the point that this is the same healing power that Jesus had; this healing power is also demonstrated by the deacons Stephen and Philip [Acts 6:8; 8:13].

□ **Arguments for miracles being exceptional:**

- There are arguments for healing in the atonement [Matt 8:17]; but there is no full healing until the resurrection beyond death; so miraculous physical healing is the exception;
- Exceptional healings are not spread evenly through either Scripture or church history but seem to cluster around initial stages and key advances;
- There is no evidence that Jesus healed the majority of people in his day;
- Jesus warns against those who work counterfeit signs and wonders in his name [Matt 7:21-23], especially in the last days [Matt 24:5];
- Jesus refuses to perform signs on demand and warns against trusting the spectacular [Matt 12:38-42; John 4:48; 20:29];

- Even the most well-authenticated signs do not necessarily prove divine origin, as with the Pharisees saying Jesus' healings were demonically inspired [Matt 9:32-33; 12:22-24];
- Jesus' temptations were to encourage him not to misuse his power [Luke 4:1-12]; Scripture is quite clear that there is no necessary protection by God from suffering [cf. Luke 22:39-46 – Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane]. Paul makes the same point [esp. 2 Cor 4:7-18; 6:3-10]; not all receive or benefit from the gifts of healing, God's grace is sufficient, God's power made perfect in weakness [2 Cor 12:8].

While we shall discuss the practical challenge of expecting miracles below, the biblical arguments above, alongside the witness of history and the church worldwide today, give us reason to be certain that miraculous healings have taken place throughout church history and continue to take place today. We would certainly expect miracles of healing where the kingdom of God is advancing for the first time, but also as challenges to unbelief that would certainly include western culture. However, as we shall continue to discuss, there can be no dictating how and where God will in fact act.

Understanding atonement

The relationship between healing and atonement has been much under discussion in recent years. It is important to highlight the central issues of this difficult and sometimes contentious subject. One of the problems is that this is an area in which there is both certainty and yet mystery, so let us at least identify the issues and try to plot some working principles.

As we have already discussed, sickness is clearly the result of sin and rebellion, human and satanic, within the created universe. Wherever the rule of God is manifest, whether within the covenant community or in terms of the life of the age to come, there is an environment created which brings freedom, healing and release from sickness:

- '... none of these evil diseases' [Deut 7:15];
- '... no more pains ...' [Rev 21:4];
- '... the leaves on the trees are for the healing ...' [Rev 22:2].

In looking at healing in the New Testament there appear to be two interwoven strands; they are inseparably connected and yet each contains distinct elements.

□ The 'Servant' or 'atonement' strand:

'Surely he has borne our pains and carried our sicknesses
... with his stripes we are healed.'
[Isa 53:4-5]

□ The 'Messiah' or 'kingdom' strand:

'The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me ...
to bring good tidings to the afflicted ...
to bind up the broken hearted.'
[Isa 61:1]



Here in the Hebrew Scriptures we see that the ministry of both the 'Servant' and the 'Messiah' have important healing dimensions; this continues over to the Gospels:

- **Matthew** clearly links the public healing ministry of Jesus with that of both the Servant [8:14-17] and the Messiah [11:2-6];
- **Mark**, in the story of the paralytic [2:1-12], shows that healing comes through forgiveness; Jesus says, 'Your sins are forgiven ... Go and sin no more';
- **Luke**, in the story of the woman with the twisted spine [13:10-13], shows that healing is freedom, setting people free from satanic bandage. [This idea is present in all the Gospels];
- **John**, in the story of the man born blind [9:3], shows that sickness may not be the result of direct personal sin and that in such a case it is an opportunity for a demonstration of an act of God;
- **John**, in the story of the man at the pool of Bethesda [5:2-9], shows that not everyone who is sick will necessarily be sought out for healing. There is inscrutable sovereignty as well.

There is clearly healing in the atonement. Where sickness is the result of personal sin, repentance and faith will bring healing, a whole dimension of forgiveness.

Where sickness is the more general result of human rebellion we can see the act of the atonement cutting its root and therefore its power. This must be an important foundation for the public ministry of healing [cf. Matt 8:16-17]. But this does not mean, as some erroneously teach, that everyone must be healed without question.

There is clearly healing in the proclamation of the kingdom of God. It is the loosing of those whom Satan has bound. It is the bringing in of the release of Jubilee and the life of the age to come. It is the freedom of the eschatological work of Christ.

Some are not healed. Some will not receive [no repentance]. Some will not believe [no faith]. Others are not given the opportunity. This is a difficult area in which we must walk sensitively:

JESUS

SERVANT

'carried
our
sicknesses'

Atonement

'faith in the
accomplished
work of Christ'

forgiveness

MESSIAH

'authority
over
sicknesses'

Kingdom

'faith in the
eschatological
work of Christ'

freedom

Each is a dimension of the complete ministry and work of Jesus. Different circumstances highlight different emphases. They set the foundation and the environment for Christians to exercise physical healing. There are no automatic principles here. We still have to hear God afresh in each situation and exercise both



wisdom and faith in doing what is appropriate. The truth about healing in terms of the atonement and the kingdom are equally true in the case of disability, long-term nursing care or miraculous recovery.

Prayer of faith

This is the point at which we interact directly with both sickness and the will of God. This is the place at which there is often significant doubt, confusion, failure, guilt and fear for many Christians. This is the situation in which there can be a great deal of rhetoric with few actual results. It is, however, also the area where wonderful things do happen.

The central question is, 'What actually is the relationship between faith and healing?' As we have already seen, the example of Jesus brings a range of emphases:

- He heals *because* of faith [cf. Mark 5:34-36];
- He heals to *instil* faith [cf. John 20:31];
- He does not heal due to *lack* of faith [cf. Matt 13:58].

In this context the words of Jesus that many people find most challenging are those that follow the disciples questioning the reason for their failure to heal the epileptic boy:

'Because of your little faith.
For truly I tell you,
if you have the faith the size of a mustard seed,
you will say to this mountain,
"Move from here to there",
and it will move;
and nothing will be impossible for you.'
[Matt 17:20]

Then there are the words of James:

'The prayer of faith will save the sick,
and the Lord will raise them up.'
[5:15]

A biblical understanding of faith sees it rooted in and sourced from God himself: 'Faith is making happen what God wants to happen. In the light of this an individual person's faith lies in their ability to sense or recognise what God is wanting to do and having the confidence and willingness to respond and act in harmony with that truth.'¹⁰ This challenges the popular notion that faith is 'positive feeling' to be generated within each individual; faith is primarily to do with response.

The 'prayer of faith' is humbling because the first requirement is to obtain a sense of God's will. We can pray expressing our desire for someone to be healed, but the

¹⁰ The details and implication of all this are discussed in much more detail in the session 'Moving in Faith' 03.02.05



confidence of the prayer of faith comes from a growing certainty as to God's purpose in a particular sickness. So answer to the question, 'How much faith do we need for someone to be healed?' really is 'the size of a grain of mustard seed' –the capacity simply to hear and believe rather than huge spiritual stature! This is why Jesus' repeated model is 'childlikeness' [cf. Matt 18:2-5; Mark 10:14-15]. He repeatedly speaks of 'little faiths' [cf. Matt 6:30; 8:26; 14:31; 16:8; Luke 12:28], but only with reference to his disciples. There is a seriousness, gentleness and frustration in urging them to exercise creative trust in him from which true authority would flow.

The very practical question which asks, 'Is there a difference in the power of a single prayer and persistent prayer?' is an important one. The example of Jesus [cf. Matt 8:16] and the words of James [5:15] give the impression of an authoritative command or single effective prayer. However, James goes on in the same passage to refer to Elijah who 'prayed fervently' [v17] for both drought and then rain. However, the story would suggest intensity rather than duration in time. We should reflect on the facts that:

- True faith comes from the authority and certainty of knowing God's will and expecting it to happen;
- We live in a spiritual environment that is hostile to God's will and there is a real struggle;
- There is a difference between prayer that expresses deep desire for healing, an asking for God's will and the authoritative prayer for healing;
- If someone is not apparently healed after prayer we need to keep supporting them in love, ask God to help us see the situation clearly and refuse to stimulate guilt, recriminations and vague false hopes.

James makes reference to 'calling the elders and anointing with oil' [5:14], which leads some to ask, 'How should prayer for physical healing actually be carried out?' Is there a proper procedure? A study of New Testament healings would suggest not! The only common thread appears to be simple authority, dignity towards the patient and only involving those for whom it is appropriate.

The significance of anointing with oil when praying for the sick is much discussed. Most references to oil appear medicinal [cf. Isa 1:6; Mark 6:13; Luke 10:34]; though it could also be a tangible symbol with meaning to help focus faith, in the way that water does in baptism and bread and wine in breaking bread. This probably helps to explain how Jesus' robe [Mark 5:27], Peter's shadow [Acts 5:15] and Paul's handkerchief [Acts 19:11-12] could all come to be vehicles of healing.

Healing and mission

There is absolutely no question that Christian involvement in physical healing, whether caring for the sick or practising miracles, has been at the forefront of mission and proclaiming the gospel throughout the whole of church history. We have seen that the Gospel writers saw Jesus' miracles of healing as demonstrations of the presence of God's kingdom and giving reason to have faith and enter it [cf. Luke 11:20]. This pattern continued through the New Testament community [e.g. Acts 3:1-10, 4:5-22] and beyond.

There is no doubt that dramatic physical healings do help unbelievers come to faith in Jesus:

‘Many believed in his name because they saw the signs that he was doing.’
[John 3:23]

However, there is no guarantee that people will always come to faith when seeing a miraculous healing:

‘He casts out demons by Beelzebul, the ruler of demons.’
[Luke 11:15]

If miraculous physical healing is such an important dimension in Christian mission and proclaiming the gospel, then there are some important questions to be asked:

- Why are there so many healings in the Bible and so few in local churches?
- Why do there seem to be more miraculous healings in the two-thirds world?

There are a number of responses that we need to reflect on in the light of these questions:

- The intensity of the editing of the biblical text makes it very difficult to obtain a clear picture as to how frequently healings actually occurred in relation to other events;
- Many miraculous healings obviously did occur; hence the stir created at the time, which certainly is a complete contrast to western local churches;
- They took place at a time when the prevailing culture needed to be challenged, but that is exactly what is required in the West today;
- There seem little doubt that our rationalist culture has made it hard for many Christians to believe in the miraculous; added to this both the hype and the disappointments of the past, plus the lack of serious debate and careful teaching, leave many very sceptical;
- The apparent contrast of reports of many powerful healings in the two-thirds world suggests a greater willingness to recognise the need for spiritual power in everyday circumstances, to be more spiritually attuned and have fewer rationalist constraints: a simpler approach to faith.

One phenomenon of the last century that has influenced thinking about miraculous healings across the world has been the rise of the faith-healing evangelist. We know that Jesus spoke to very large crowds of people in the context of healing:

‘A large crowd kept following him,
because they saw the signs he was doing for the sick.’
[John 6:2]

We know that from the 18th century, in the evangelistic meetings of Wesley and Whitfield, and those inspired by them, healings apparently took place. In the 20th century, with the rise of the Pentecostal and charismatic movements, meetings that make healing the basis for evangelism became numerous and global. That amazing

things have and do happen on occasions is not doubted, but the style and rationale trouble many. The theology used is often questionable, the language intemperate, the results meagre or even non-existent, and the willingness for the claims to be examined absent. The exponents leave themselves open to charges of fraud, manipulation and hysteria.

All of this has disturbed many Christians, and has created a notion about healing that removes it from the life of the local church and its expectation in the ordinary circumstances of life. Paul's teaching on the subject is found in 1 Corinthians 12, where he speaks of 'gifts of healing' as one of the gifts of the Spirit [v9], and one of the gifts to the body of Christ [vv28, 30]. The plural form is fascinating and suggests a variety of ways healing can serve the church and the gospel. The context suggests that these gifts are there for all believers to receive, but that there may be individuals who carry a particular responsibility [perhaps to encourage others in the gifts] in the local Christian community. Whether we speak of these people as having a 'ministry of healing' in a distinct way is uncertain, as this ministry is clearly a gift to every member of the body.

There would appear to be much for each Christian still to discover about miraculous healing in the context of mission: seeing opportunities, hearing God's will and acting in humility. It would seem to express itself most effectively in the life of someone who is both childlike and Christlike.

Complementary treatments

Christians stand in a fascinating place in the world of healing. On the one hand they have a long history of being actively involved in established medical science while at the same time having a view and experience of the world that looks to the spiritual as the true source of all wholeness. They dispute the notion that empirical remedies alone can provide all the solutions and yet, as we observed towards the beginning of this session, alternative medicine is also a significant challenge to contemporary Christians:

- The limitations of clinical medicine see increasing numbers of people turning to alternative therapies, often in a desire to include a spiritual dimension to their healing; however, the majority are bypassing the church as an option either because they do not believe that it has anything distinctive to offer or simply because it is seen as powerless and irrelevant;
- From the perspective of many Christians most, if not all, alternative medicine is deemed suspect because it does not conform to the accepted orthodoxies of medical science or, more seriously, because it is said to have its origins in false spiritualities and even the occult, and as a result it seriously contaminates all users, however innocent it may appear on the surface.

The first problem, as mentioned above, is that many Christians have consciously or unconsciously bought into the mindset that believes that the rational and empirical are the only basis for real knowledge; certainly in terms of everyday living. Their spirituality has been reduced to a limited and deeply personalised compartment of their lives. Added to this there is the simple fact that conventional medicine is so



successful in so many areas, in spite of its limitations. For them the idea and experience of miraculous healing, even in a totally Christian context, is as difficult to engage with as it is for most secular non-Christians. Of course the excesses, perceived or real, of many healing evangelists only reinforce this position.

Clearly some Christian concerns about some alternative medicine are quite valid. There are practices overtly rooted in the demonic, with spells and charms to bind the sickness. Others have rituals and responses that are very likely to open up an individual to spiritual forces and psychological influences that are harmful and destructive. However, all these dangers should quickly become obvious to most spiritually sensitive Christians. The acid test for a Christian is whether the lordship, and their discipleship, of Jesus is in any way compromised by the demands of the therapy; if it is leave it alone. All local churches are responsible to develop an environment of wisdom in which these matters are shared and discussed, rather than a culture of fear or ignorance about complementary therapies. In an atmosphere of mature spirituality there are few dangers for even the most immature of Christians.

It must be remembered that much alternative medicine has a long and distinguished history and has simply developed from a different way of looking at the world. It has approached medical problems from a different perspective and found excellent results. It quite properly challenges orthodox medicine to broaden its horizons significantly. Putting it simply, there is every reason to believe that these different approaches have come up with different, often improved and valid medical alternatives. Over the years many Christians have found osteopathy, acupuncture, homeopathy, hatha yoga exercises and much more to be a great source of healing and health, usually combined with conventional medicine as necessary and prayer.

The question, 'How do healers in other faiths often get the same results as Christians?' is an important one. We might ask, 'Do they?' to which the answer is, 'Apparently, yes':

- In some cases, where it is the result of demonic activity, the healing will often be dependent on wearing a certain amulet or giving devotion or allegiance to the power involved; failure to do this brings a return of the condition;
- In other cases the means by which the healing is brought has good physical and emotional reasons as to why it is successful, though unconventional from a western perspective, and is to be welcomed;
- In many cases it may well be just another wonderful example of the way the love of God reaches out to meet people in distress though it often goes unrecognised by most of the people involved; as Jesus says:

'For the one who is not against us is on our side.'
[Mark 9:40; Luke 9:50]

It lies at the very edges of scientific enquiry to try to show the validity of the spiritual in healing. Attempts to verify miracles may be made with 'before and after' X-rays and case notes, but for some the debate will continue. More generally it is recognised that in the western world between 60% and 90% of visits to a doctor are for mind–



body stress-related symptoms. This has led to different studies being done to try to identify the link between spirituality, health and illness.¹¹

- A study in 1995, of 232 recovering heart surgery patients, found the death rate was three times lower among those who drew strength from religious faith;
- A study over 30 years showed that on average churchgoers have lower blood pressure [5mm lower] than non-churchgoers [adjusted for all risk factors] and people who attend church regularly have half the risk of dying from coronary-artery disease;
- A study in 1996, of 4,000 elderly people, found those who attended religious services were less depressed and healthier than those who did not;
- A study of 30 women recovering from hip fractures showed that those who claimed God as their source of strength could walk further and had less depression on discharge;
- A number of studies have found lower rates of depression and anxiety-related illnesses among the religiously committed; the suicide rate is four times higher for non-churchgoers;
- People who have religious faith and are socially involved have a 14-fold advantage over those who are not;
- Studies show that of those practising daily meditative exercises; 70% of insomniacs slept well, 35% of infertile women became pregnant, 34% of chronic-pain sufferers reduced their use of painkillers;
- In a study in 1988, of 393 randomly selected coronary-care patients, half were prayed for [quite unknowingly to the subjects] by born-again Christians; those not prayed for were five times more likely to need antibiotics and three times more likely to develop complications;
- A more recent study of intercessory prayer with alcoholics found no benefit, while a 1995 study with 20 AIDS patients was 'encouraging' but too small a sample to be statistically significant.

It is the range of observations like these that has led Harvard professor Herbert Benson to write, 'Humans are actually engineered for religious faith.' The findings are inevitably disputed. The astonishing ability of the 'placebo effect' cannot be discounted. However, it places the subject of spirituality and healing into the arena of interest and debate; where both Christians and alternative practitioners stand together. This is a wonderful opportunity for Christians to join with others in challenging conventional medicine to open its eyes and its mind, while at the same time challenging complementary medicine about its values and the quality of its results.

Suffering and discipleship

Whether following extensive medical treatment, or prayer, or both, many Christians face very long periods [often lifelong] of illness or disability. For them the struggle and the pressures can be overwhelming:

¹¹ This quote and all the information quoted above it comes from an article 'Faith and Healing' in *Time Magazine*, 24 June 1996.



- Sometimes the apparent lack of response from a God who they believe is loving and powerful enough to heal brings severe doubts and questions;
- Sometimes the misguided enthusiasm of Christians arguing that with enough faith everyone can be healed leaves them feeling guilty and condemned;
- Sometimes the lack of serious theological discussion and teaching on the subject means they are not able to grapple spiritually with the issues.

The paradox is that sickness and disability seem to have as significant part to play in the experience of a Christian as do healing and health. This is both a disturbing and an exciting fact. It confirms the complexity that has run through the whole of this session, that physical healing presents us with difficult and divergent questions and sometimes perplexing answers.

The biblical text reveals the struggle with sickness as important to spiritual development:

- Job shows that the key is relationship with God [Job 19:25];
- Jacob becomes Israel even though he bears the physical scars [Gen 32:24-32];
- Hezekiah's illness demonstrates his faith in God [2 Kgs 20:1-7];
- Paul's 'thorn in the flesh' had important spiritual consequences [2 Cor 12:7-10].

When confronted with any form of sickness, the door to healing should always be pushed gently and sensitively, inquiring if this is the way God wants to take the person. Listening carefully, if healing does not appear to be the path [at least for the moment] then the call is to discover God, and our own spiritual development, through the struggle with illness or disability. There is absolutely no question that Christians demonstrating their faith in the face of the ravages of physical brokenness or sickness are among the most powerful witnesses to truth available – showing that discipleship is about grappling with the real world in all its ugliness yet pointing to a reality that is greater than it. So both healing and disability bring glory to God, each in their own way an essential witness to the church in the world.

It is clear that God does not heal everyone. The question, 'Who does he choose to heal and who does he choose not to heal?' simply cannot be answered. It is one of the many things at the centre of the inscrutability of God's will and we have to accept that fact. What is absolutely certain is that this mystery is at the heart of his character of love. His love for those who remain ill is every bit as great for those who are healed. There is unquestionably no difference.

There are examples of the mysterious nature of God's choice in the New Testament:

- In John 5:2-9 the story of Jesus healing the man at the Pool of Bethesda; there were crowds of sick people in the five porches but Jesus appears to heal only one. Why did he choose him and what about the others?
- In Acts 12 there are events that when observed together raise many questions:
 - James is arrested and executed by Herod [v2];
 - Peter is arrested and imprisoned [v5];
 - The church prays for Peter's release [v5];
 - Peter miraculously escapes [vv7-11];
 - The church disbelieves Peter's release [vv12-16];

- Peter hides [v17];
- Peter's guards are executed [v17];
- Herod is struck down by God [v23].

Why does James have to die? Why does Peter escape when the church didn't really seem to believe or expect it to happen? Why does Peter hide? Isn't God protecting him? Why did the guards have to die, as they were not to blame for the escape? Why didn't Herod die earlier and so prevent the whole series of events in the first place?

There simply are no satisfactory answers to questions like these. Both God's will and this world are complex. We are simply called to trust in God's character, which is also complex but utterly dependable and saturated in love.

A Christian suffering and struggling with sickness and disability points us towards the end-times when at the *parousia* and resurrection there will be complete wholeness and healing. This is not some 'opium' to dull reality, but at the heart of what it means to be a Christian in the world. Paul makes the point clearly:

'Therefore I am content with weaknesses,
insults hardships, persecutions and calamities for the sake of Christ;
for whenever I am weak then I am strong.'
[2 Cor 12:10]

'I consider that the sufferings of this present time
are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us.'
[Rom 8:18]

There are those who claim that a person can be 'healed' even though their symptoms still remain. As a result of their sickness they may have been 'healed' of attitudes such as resentment, bitterness and fear. They may have been 'healed' in their relationships with others and with God, but if their physical symptoms remain they have not been healed in their body and they are still sick. This is not a tragedy but truth. They may have met with God, but they must also be truthful and honest and not play theological, or any other kind, of mind games.

The phrase 'death is the final healing' is rather trite; the truth is in the resurrection! No one, not even those miraculously healed, will be fully whole until then. Healings 'now' are not central to our present experience of salvation, but will be at its heart 'then'. This is not just some 'hanging on' until then – years of suffering the consequence of a heartless God – but the opportunity for his people to demonstrate his life whatever the circumstances in a sceptical world, sustained by a living hope.

More questions than answers still remain; but the answers that we do have make much more sense than all the alternatives others would provide.

Pastoral wisdom

As we conclude this session we need to consider some of the practical and pastoral aspects of physical healing. It is at this point that the seeds of so many tragedies are sown. We will illustrate this with two case-study examples:

□ Case Study 1: Serious diagnosis

Someone in a local church is diagnosed with a serious and probably terminal illness and the most common response in many congregations is to immediately begin praying for miraculous healing. Promises, prophecies and prayers all fuel faith and the faithful. Sometimes something amazing happens, but so often it does not and people feel either let down or guilty, or both. Pastoral wisdom will face the reality and work with the patient, family and congregation to reach out for God's love and strength for the weeks and months ahead. They will encourage the best medical treatment alongside an openness and readiness to hear from God about healing; he will make it very clear what action to take. There can be congregational prayer expressing their desire for healing but it must be remembered that this may not be God's plan. The issues involved [as discussed above] must be remembered or taught. Wisdom is willing to fight it all the way, listening for God, bringing comfort to all involved and recognising God whatever the outcome. There is nothing God cannot do, but the key is knowing what he wants us to do.

□ Case Study 2: Remarkable healing

Someone with a long-term, even permanent, serious medical condition believes that God has healed them completely. They want to, or are even being encouraged to stop taking all their medication, have nothing more to do with their doctor and publicly testify to their healing. Pastoral wisdom will rejoice at any initial evidence that what they are saying may be true. They will encourage them to visit their doctor as soon as possible to get a professional opinion; even Jesus told people he healed to visit and have the healing confirmed by the priests. Visiting a doctor is not a sign of a lack of faith but evidence of a strong belief that something really has happened. They will advise them to continue with their medication; their doctor [and possibly their bodies] will soon indicate if it is no longer necessary. Remission and placebo are both possibilities. When a genuine healing is tested there are usually few doubts; if there are, time will always tell and that is nothing to be afraid of.

Physical healing is a wonderful opportunity for the church; to be more involved in all aspects of compassionate medical practice while ever expectant for God to perform miraculous recoveries.

Questions and Reflections

1. How can we help our local churches to be places where people feel as accepted and valued if they are sick as if they are healed?



2. Someone has been told that the only reason they have not been healed is because they do not have enough faith. What would you say to both the person who was sick and the one who had made the observation?

3. It has been said that when it comes to sickness and healing Christians should support both prayer and public health. What do you think about this statement? Is this a summary of what a Christian attitude to this subject should be? Do you think someone working in the medical profession with a strong personal faith brings anything distinctive to their work?

Reading & Resources

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